crafts

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OCEAN SWELL THE BRITISH CRAFTS CENTRE JILL CROWLEY

MAKING GOOD

– in whose eyes?

Peter Dormer analyses this current touring exhibition, organised by Frances Smith for South East Arts. Photography by James Hadfield

The function of criticism and exhibitions lies in enabling a viewer to see as much as possible of the variety of aspects that each work has to offer. The attraction of *Making Good*[1] does not lie in the wonder of the work, some of which is bad, but in the presentation of the ideas that produced the objects on display. The selection of ten makers' work (each has presented a specially commissioned piece) together with ancillary information in drawings and notes has the merit of bringing one close to each object. But the approach is risky because in seeing the preliminary drawings and the makers' notes one's suspicions are confirmed that some of the work is weak.

What is apparent about the drawings is just how few of them are investigative; they do not show research and could not possibly have fed the mind. We live in barbarous times: there are not many tutors left in the art schools (or secondary schools) who can teach the craft of drawing – such is the legacy of twenty years of "creativity." Without the craft of drawing it is difficult to investigate the visual, physical world.

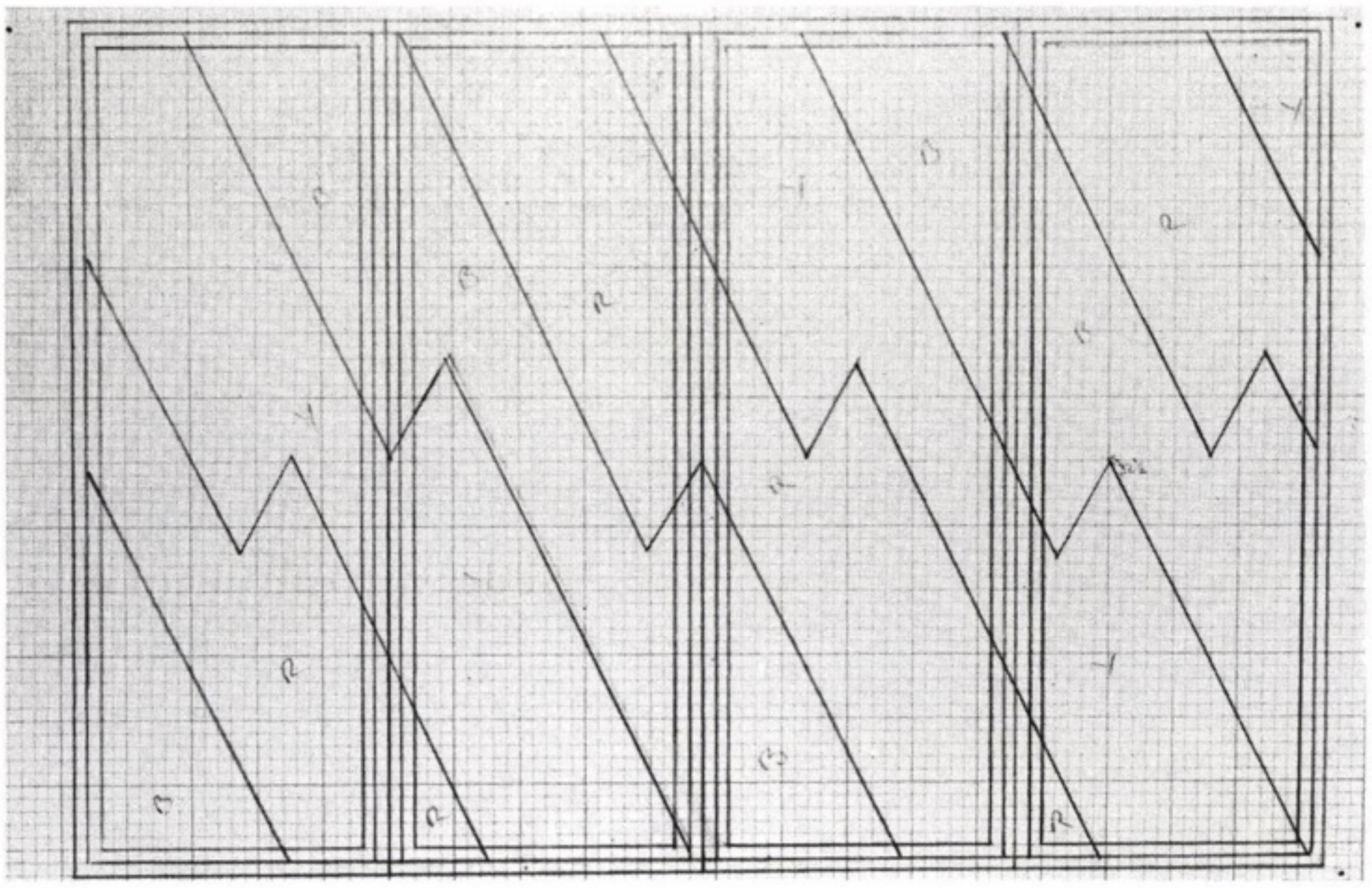
Weavers Mary Farmer and Lesley Millar, for example, appear to draw only what they have already thought out, or, and not much better, have lightly touched upon a number of sources without getting to the bottom of any of them. I like Lesley Millar's screen with its abstract diagonal pattern of primary colours but find it difficult to believe that "looking at stained-glass windows . . . and at Japanese screens, especially those depicting landscape" has had much to do with the result. It is a decorative screen. It does not, as she hopes, echo the shape and drama of a mountainous landscape any more than it does a hazard warning sign.

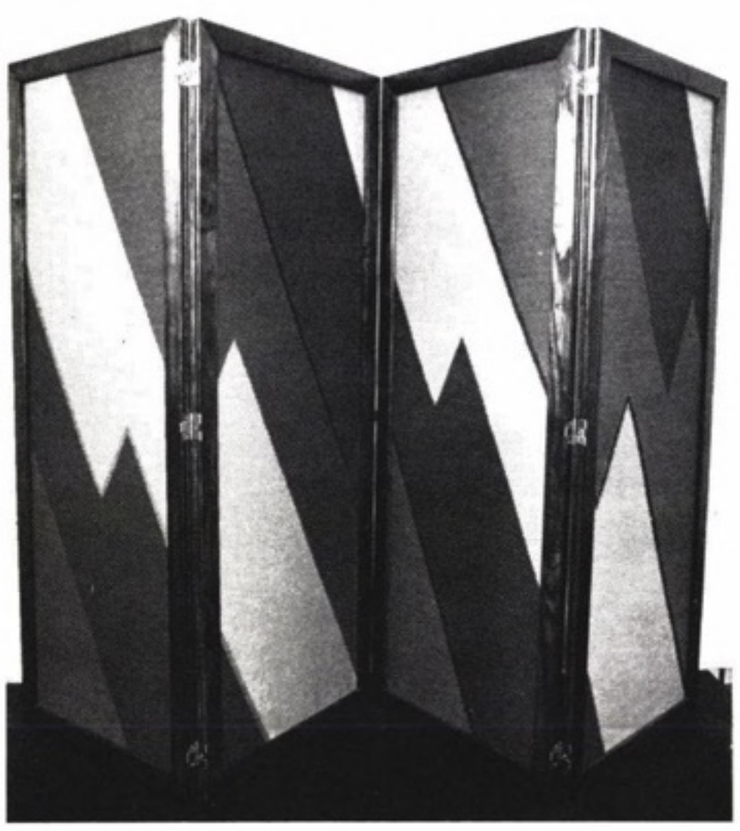
Interestingly, David Cowley, a lecturer at Goldsmiths', ran a drawing course at the 1981 summer school of the Association of Guilds of Weavers, believing that few textile teachers provide drawing in a way that is integral to their courses. Cowley sees drawing as encouraging "an exploratory and critical attitude to the work – beyond just that of a preparatory drawing and acceptable 'sketch' for a finished textile."

The drawback of the "Have an idea, make a sketch, make an object" approach is that it allows arbitrariness to dominate. For example, Colin Pearson's work is accompanied in *Making Good* by his claim that the emphasis and exaggeration of non-functional qualities is intended to evoke emotional rather than intellectual responses. Colin Pearson's pots have baroque wings and if these appendages evoke emotion then it is in a most arbitrary manner – wings can connect with all manner of things, from angels, Christ, and anti-Christs to seed-pods and propellers. That such connections can be made is no guarantee that the forms themselves evoke an emotional response – unless it is of a very general nature. Moreover, the emotional/intellectual distinction is itself arbitrary, and sounds (and looks) like an opting-out of trying to think through what one is doing.

James Tower's work is different. This ceramicist, who has five pieces in the exhibition, is one of the ten whose drawing and painting obviously informs his three-dimensional work. The thoroughness of the paintings and drawing has led to the thoroughness with which the decoration and form in his work go together. The white and charcoal decorated terracotta forms are of a piece: the decoration is as one with the form as the veining and coloration of a stone found on a beach. I am not sure if I like the look of Tower's work but I think it is the most successful in the show and it confirms his statement: "Many of the pieces reflect marine forms; tidal patterns, stones, and pebbles on the seashore, and the ephemeral movement of waves and spray. It is this element of movement and rhythm, expressed together with, and sometimes against the form, that I try to convey. To be successful there has to be a total interrelation of form and decoration." The physical feature that finally convinced me about Tower's work was that in each piece the hole at the top was exactly right in shape and size, in location, and even in the thickness of "rim" for the line, form, and bulk of the piece. That sounds trivial but such precision of space to material form is of the kind that I admire in Barbara Hepworth's work.

A disappointing aspect of some contemporary craft is its whimsy – and ceramics is prone to the disease. Either a pot is a pot or it is a successful piece of art. There is no middle course other than the argument that some functional pots also succeed as art. In this exhibition Tony Bennett has shown that if you take a frog, sit it on its haunches, squash it down a bit, pull open its jaws so that the mouth is vast and horizontal, you have a funny-shaped container. No doubt this is in a long tradition of British humour that goes from





Toby jugs to knickers and bums.

Bennett used to draw cartoons – a medium better suited to his ideas. But then I was confounded by the work of Lyn Wait which, at the Gardner Centre, was thoughtfully placed next to Bennett's. Wait's work looked like more whimsy until it dawned upon me that she had taken three-dimensional ceramics and drawing and put the two together in a literal way. There is a largish piece called *Horse and Flowers* – a horse, a rider, and flowers around the base. The horse is inelegant and misses a Thelwell caricature by a short nose. The jockey is dwarfish rather than petite. Yet, with the use of underglaze crayons, Wait has caught the movement of scumbling line and applied it to a galloping horse.

The preliminary drawings for *Horse and Flowers* were essential to the outcome of the object. Wait's work has potential simply because the possibilities for exciting images (and humour) are so many, given her idea of playing off the "illusion", created by drawing, against the "reality" of a material object. At the moment the work falls short: it reaches beyond whimsy and mantelpiece ornaments but the drawing is not yet strong enough to make the work convincing.

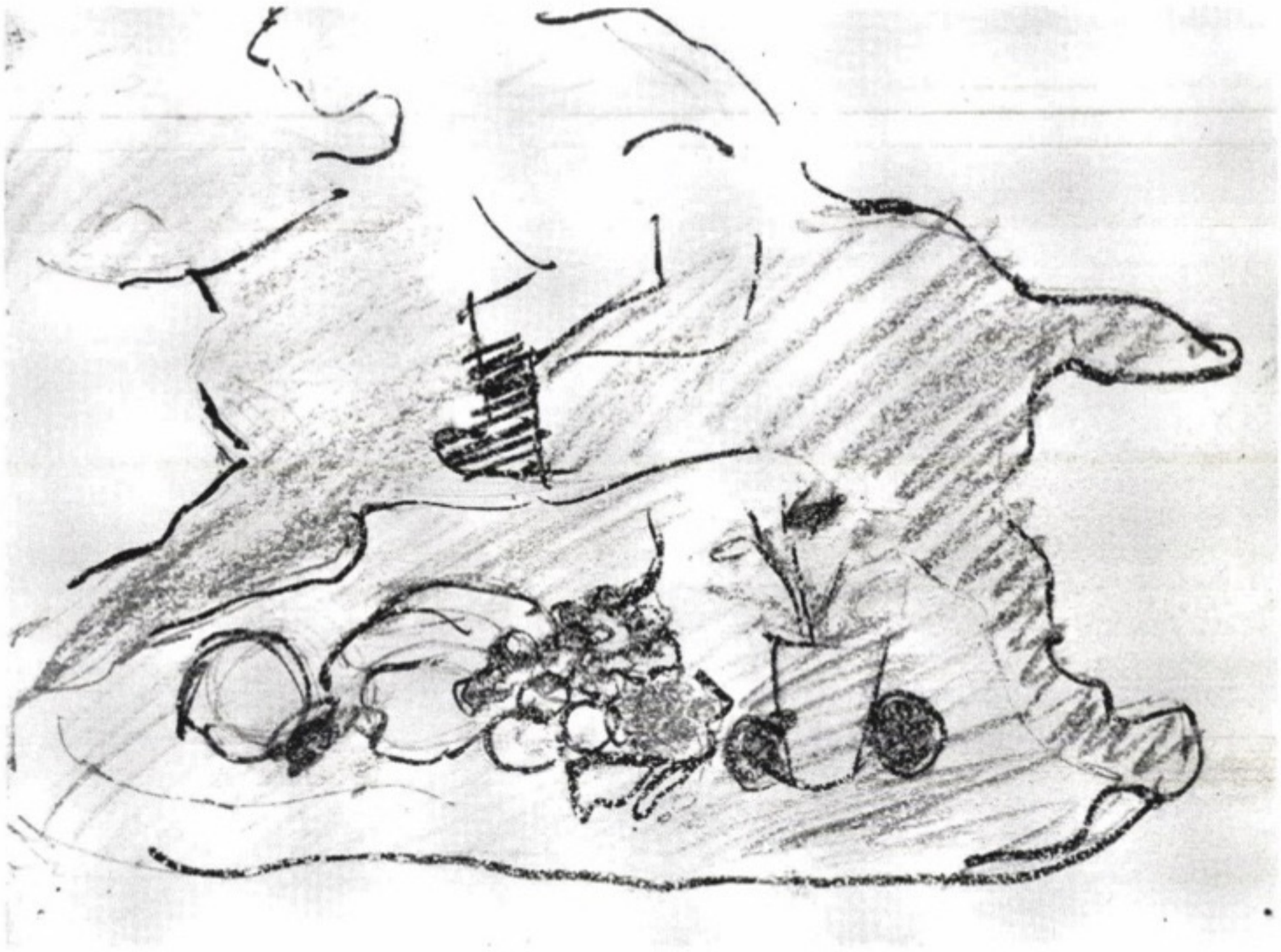
Whimsy lurked in Faith Shannon's bookbindings, but her binding and box for Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* work because they are a bit of melodrama with touches of exaggeration, such as red fabric showing through a slash in the black leather, giving the suggestion of a fatal wound.

The other makers represented in the exhibition are: Fed Baier, furniture-designer/maker; Paul Harrison, jeweller/metalsmith; and Lucy Goffin, maker of quilted garments with appliqué, beading and piping.

The exhibition does not indicate how long the makers spent at each stage of the process from conception to finished product. It would have been interesting to have been shown the differences in working methods – those who worked out their ideas as the object progressed as opposed to those who spent an age working around the problem. Of course, the pat answer is that the whole career of the maker is "preparation" and also that the work is constantly being informed by a variety of ideas and experiences. The pat answer is not convincing.

The exhibition succeeds as a whole rather than in all its parts and it is surprising how little utilitarian work is shown. I do not believe that crafts should necessarily be functional but I have some sympathy with Stephen Bayley's essay in the exhibition's catalogue.[2] Bayley says it would be nice, for example, to see some well-made and well-designed British chairs at a reasonable price for the popular backside. Unfortunately, Bayley's essay, which has the excruciating title *Arty Facts*, is a squib and since the only point he is making is that there is a shortage of functional crafts, he might as well have sent a telegram. Penny Sparke's essay gives "hints" (sic) *Towards a History of Craft*, but this is disappointing because it makes generalisations without a commitment to an argument.

This, I believe, is one of the weaknesses of contemporary craft (and art) criticism. The makers, the artists, and in this instance, exhibition organiser Frances Smith, put themselves on the line regarding what they stand for. The writers rarely do. One of the problems about being critical is that nearly everyone insists that they welcome criticism, "as long as it is positive." This, generally, is a lie. Most people, critics included, hate being criticised, but once any of us makes a public statement (be it a pot, painting, or an article) then one's hat is in the ring: it'll get picked up or trodden on – or worse, ignored.



1 Exhibition Venues: John Hansard Gallery, Southampton University, 1 March–3 April; Portsmouth Museum & Art Gallery, 10 April–23 May; Royal Museum Canterbury, 29 May–19 June.
2 *Making Good* catalogue, South East Arts £1·50.

Opposite: Mountain Summer, *drawing, and screen, 1·5m high, cotton warp, worsted weft, dyed and made by Lesley Millar, 1981. Above: drawing and finished* Horse, *73cm high, 20cm deep, crank body (pre-made) with raku glaze, underglaze crayon, fired to 1,000 C, by Lyn Wait*